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ABSTRACT

Impelled by students' difficulties to learn new concepts from assigned readings, this paper examines effective literacy instruction in their respective classrooms. By targeting three linked areas of concern: students' motivation to read assigned texts, the learning strategies students bring to their reading experiences, and students' abilities to comprehend and apply information from assigned reading. Recent research in the target areas was reviewed, and two surveys, one each for instructor and student, were developed to gather information on students' reading habits and attitudes, as well as information on instructional methods. The survey data was used to make informed decisions on how best to revise curricula in order to help students become independent synthesizers, organizers, interpreters, and appliers of information gained from content area readings. This paper presents an overview of survey findings and makes recommendations, one of which is that future research should focus on the nature of the literacy attitudes, habits, abilities, and understandings that students bring to college. (Contains 36 references.) (EMH)

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LITERACY LEARNING AND TEACHING IN THE CONTENT AREAS: COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS AND INSTRUCTORS FINDING COMMON GROUND

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Introduction

> "It's boring! I have a lot of trouble getting into the reading. I usually don't read because we cover it in class anyway!" (Language arts student)
>
> "I have problems deciphering the text. I try hard, but at the end of the reading I forget what I have read. Is this normal? I hope my fears are groundless." (Biology student)
>
> "Sometimes, it just doesn't make sense! I don't see how half the stuff relates to anything." (History student)

If comments such as these are examined in terms of Wells and Chang-Wells's (1992) notion that literate students are able to understand and use different texts for different purposes, it is possible to appreciate the consternation of a group of community college instructors over the growing number of students experiencing difficulties learning new concepts from their assigned readings.

This problem, coupled with the instructors' lack of expertise in the field of literacy learning and teaching, cut at the very cores of the instructors' classroom programs. The instructors felt a critical need to examine the nature of effective literacy instruction in their respective content area classrooms. They began work on this study by targeting three inextricably linked areas of concern--students' motivation to read assigned texts, the learning strategies students bring to their reading experiences, and students' abilities to comprehend and apply information from assigned readings. Next, they reviewed recent research in these areas. Stimulated by their readings, they developed a student survey and an instructor survey, each designed to gather information on the students' reading habits and attitudes, as well as information on instructional methods. They chose this approach because they did not want to adopt a prescribed, "cure all" approach to literacy instruction. Rather, they wanted to use the survey data to make informed decisions on how best to revise their curricula in order to help students become independent synthesizers, organizers, interpreters, and appliers of information gained from content area readings. This paper presents an overview of their findings from the student and faculty surveys and makes recommendations for curricula revision.

Literature Review

A Question of Reading Motivation

> "It's boring! I have a lot of trouble getting into the reading. I usually don't read because we cover it in class anyway!" (Language arts student)

Motivating students to read and respond to assigned texts is a popular focus in the literature. Shuman's (1989) assertion that the human element should be the primary consideration in the learning process makes good sense. If motivated students are those who feel accepted and encouraged within a positive classroom atmosphere, it behooves instructors to carefully examine ways in which this might be facilitated. Lowman (1991) echoes this stance by insisting that instructors, instead of complaining about unmotivated students, should strengthen those teaching practices that encourage more intrinsic motivation to learn.

For students to become enthusiastic and, in turn, competent readers and writers, instructors must actively involve them in setting a purpose for studying. Anders and Guzzetti (1996) believe that students are more likely to find interest in topics that are personally meaningful and have application to their lives. Similarly, learning environments that include realistic expectations for students (Bishop-Clark & Lynch, 1992); challenging and varied assignments (Beer, 1987; Brent & Felde, 1993); varied and non-threatening assessment methods (Metz, 1990); culturally-appropriate content material and instructional methods (Au, 1993); opportunities to be creative

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(Beer, 1987); strong metacognitive components (Mealey, 1990); instructors as models, scaffolders, and guides in the learning process (Andrasick, 1990; Bayer, 1990; Wells & Chang-Wells, 1992); and instructors as supporters and care-givers (Bishop-Clark & Lynch, 1992; Mealey, 1990) are more likely to have higher levels of student motivation.

A Question of Strategic Reading

> "I have problems deciphering the text. I try hard, but at the end of the reading I forget what I have read. Is this normal? I hope my fears are groundless." (Biology student)

Helping students to become strategic readers is of critical importance. Grant (1994) asserts that although many students have some form of study skills instruction in high school, few receive instruction on how to internalize concepts independently from single or multiple text sources. Most community college classes are planned on the assumption that students possess this ability. Grant argues that because many students are unable to attend, interact, reconstruct, and elaborate on their assigned readings, especially in relation to a specified learning situation, instructors must develop classroom procedures that involve students in learning how to study.

An examination of some of the explicit strategy training procedures (Anders & Guzzetti, 1996; Dole, Duffy, Roehler, & Pearson, 1991; Grant, 1994) reveals common components. These include setting a purpose for reading (e.g., discussing the course objectives with the instructor and researching supporting texts and articles); understanding how new information is influenced by prior knowledge (e.g., using a graphic organizer such as a web to show related ideas); searching the text for important ideas (e.g., using a highlighter to select relevant information); organizing information so that it is personally meaningful (e.g., discussing new information and clarifying ideas with peers); examining, reviewing, consolidating, and applying the information (e.g., asking questions about how the information might be applied); and experimenting with the new information in a variety of contexts (e.g., using the information to accomplish a purpose such as debating an issue or writing a critical response paper). According to Grant (1994) providing this type of strategy instruction holds promise for helping college students to improve performance and become independent readers.

A Question of Reading Comprehension

> "Sometimes, it just doesn't make sense! I don't see how half the stuff relates to anything." (History student)

Roth (1987) found that students taught in a textbook-driven fashion tend to have difficulties understanding concepts. The transmission approach of introducing students to massive numbers of concepts without adequate explanation, demonstration of their interrelationships, or time for the processing of ideas often results in a smattering of disorganized information that can not be applied or used as a foundation for future learning. It is this type of approach that fails to equip students with abilities to understand variables, perform propositional thinking, recognize knowledge gaps, distinguish between observations and inferences, reason hypothetically, and attain metacognitive awareness.

Reading, Jacobowitz (1990) explains, is an active process where comprehension is successful only if students are engaged with the text, constructing meaning from new information that is integrated with what they already know. To become independent readers, students must be motivated, have a meaningful purpose for what they read, and be aware of strategies that will enable them to comprehend. Promoting the development of critical thinkers is a paramount concern for content area instructors. Although several definitions of literacy have emerged from the critical thinking movement (Flippo & Caverly, 1991), a focus on literacy in terms of students' abilities to construct their own knowledge (Au, 1993), explore anomalies and be open-minded in their thinking (Lewis, 1993), and connect their ways of knowing with those of others (Paul, 1987) is of greatest interest.

Collaboration between the instructor and students in the learning and teaching process has received strong support in recent years (Bayer, 1990; Kroll, 1992). Whitehead (1994) views the instructor as a guide who models positive reading behaviors in an environment where comprehension is collectively determined. Thomas (1988) takes a similar stance by urging instructors to help students develop a set of schemata, derived from personal experiences, for the interpretation of future problems. It is this foundation that enables students to understand broader points of view, appreciate the differences among various problems presented to them, and have the self-confidence to challenge the ideas of others (Andrasick, 1990).

A Question of Curriculum

The current literature leaves little doubt that reading motivation, strategy acquisition and application, and comprehension are critical considerations in the process of helping students to become literate (Flippo & Caverly, 1991; Wells & Chang-Wells, 1992). There is also little doubt that the instructor plays a central role in this development. In response, researchers such as Jacobowitz (1990) and Schwartz (1988) seek to inspire instructors to change their attitudes toward literacy development and the methods they use to help students in their literacy development.

Because new approaches often call for radical paradigm shifts in philosophies and practices, it is essential that instructors are supported in their professional development (Rosenthal, 1992). Typically, this support involves workshops, conferences, and research projects that might examine approaches such as literature-based instruction (Weaver, 1994); content area integration (Witouski,1990); independent and collaborative learning (Conrad, 1993); and team-teaching across the curriculum (Magner, 1992). Or it might examine specific topics such as the roles of oral, written, visual, and body modes of language as central components of the literacy curriculum (Zeakes, 1990); the use of textbooks and reading guides (LeSourd, 1988); the development of metacognitive strategies (Anders & Guzzetti, 1996); students' reading, writing, and discussion of texts (Ganguli, 1990); the relationships among reader, text, and context (Harste, Short, & Burke, 1988); students teaching sections of the course (Meyer, 1990); technology and literacy development (Mikulecky & Clark, 1989); and authentic assessment methods (Bishop-Clark & Lynch, 1990).

Method

Research Questions

This study contributes to a better understanding of how to help community college students become independent synthesizers, organizers, interpreters, and appliers of information gained from content area readings. The central research questions are;

- What are the students' perceptions of themselves as readers?
- How motivated are the students to read assigned readings?
- What reading skills and strategies do the students possess and how are these used to bring meaning to assigned readings?
- What are the students' preferred methods of instruction?
- What are the instructors' perceptions of their students as readers (including motivation to read, abilities to use effective skills and strategies, and abilities to comprehend)?
- What are the instructors' beliefs about the purpose for reading and how do these influence choices of assigned readings and instructional methods?
- What are the instructors' suggestions for professional development supports and activities?

Setting

This study took place at a community college in the City of Honolulu, Hawai'i. The college is a state-sponsored academic institution that is part of the University of Hawai'i system. It attracts students from over fifty public and private schools in Hawai'i and from other U.S. and international schools. As an "open-door" institution, the college serves a diverse student population with widely varying needs. The student body consists of recent high school graduates, adults returning to college, persons with disabilities, immigrants, international students, senior citizens, single parents, transfer students, and veterans.

Participants

Two hundred and thirty-six students enrolled in classes in anthropology, biology, history, humanities, and language arts participated in this study. The students were from a broad range of socio-economic backgrounds. The ethnic composition was also diverse, with the majority of students being either Polynesian, Caucasian, Asian, or a mix of these. A large number had "Pidgin" (Hawai'i Creole English) or a language other than English for their first language. Each student had completed an English language competency class equivalent to a university course at the freshman level.

Eleven instructors from these content areas also participated in this study. Most were veteran instructors with at least ten or more years of teaching experience in their respective areas. Apart from the language arts instructor, none were experts in the field of literacy learning and teaching.

Data Sources and Analysis

A student survey was designed to gather information on the students' perceptions of themselves as readers; motivation to read assigned readings; use of reading skills and strategies; and preferred methods of instruction. An instructor survey was designed to gather information on the instructors' perceptions of students' reading behaviors, including motivation to read, abilities to use effective skills and strategies, and abilities to comprehend; understanding of the purpose for reading, including the types of readings assigned and expectations of students; assessment of their teaching methods; and suggestions for professional development. Each survey was comprised of twenty items in either a checklist or rank order format. The instructors administered the student surveys in class on the final day of the semester. During this time, the instructors completed the instructor surveys.

For both surveys, frequencies of responses to items were analyzed in order to identify salient patterns and themes in literacy learning and teaching across the respective content areas.

Overview of the Findings and Significance

The discrepancy between the students' perceptions of their reading abilities and the instructors' perceptions of their students as readers is particularly interesting. While fifty-eight percent of the students rated themselves as competent readers, the instructors felt that only 39% fell into this category. The absence of a definition of "reading" in both surveys might have contributed to this result. It might also reveal a fundamental problem for instructors and students--the lack of clarity on what constitutes effective content area reading, not only in relation to this study, but also in relation to preparation for classes. The researchers can only speculate on the results had "reading" been clearly defined as the ability to independently synthesize, organize, interpret, and apply information gained from content area texts.

Although 66% of the students said they usually completed their reading assignments, the popular agreement that this often occurred after the material had been discussed in class, raises an important issue regarding the

students' abilities to read independently. Of particular concern to the instructors was the time students spent each week on their readings for each class--43 percent said they spent one hour or less and 51 percent said they spent two to four hours in preparation. When asked how much time should be spent on reading, 63% of the students said two to four hours and 18% said five or more hours. In comparison, three fourths of the instructors suggested two to four hours of reading preparation and one fourth said five or more hours. The most popular reasons given by the students for the lack of reading preparation were the excessive lengths of the readings; the levels of difficulty of the readings; the lack of time available to read; an inability to relate to the readings; and a lack of interest in the types of readings, especially textbooks. Similarly, the instructors felt that a lack of time for reading, especially for students working full or part time; a lack of effective reading skills and strategies; a lack of background information needed for students to make connections to the information presented; a lack of experience in content area text reading; and difficulties learning in the language of instruction, English, made content area reading challenging for many students.

Most students felt capable of completing their reading assignments. They reported employing a range of strategies such as referencing text summaries and glossaries (70% of the students); discussing the readings with others (69%); determining the purpose for reading, including clarifying associated assignments and preparing for tests (60%); mentally asking questions about the readings (46%); writing about the readings (42%); highlighting the main ideas of the texts and writing notes (42%); and using the dictionary to find unfamiliar words (37%). Conversely, however, all the instructors questioned whether their students were strategic readers who could independently summarize, paraphrase, analyze, and apply information from their readings. The majority of students, they felt, were not able to meet the reading demands of their courses. The instructors reported spending more time on building reading strategies than on critically examining the readings with students. This strategy building focused on teaching students how to ask pertinent questions (88% of the instructors); how to read and review information for main ideas, including highlighting the text and making notes (63%); how to utilize prior knowledge to make sense of new information (39%); how to use summaries, glossaries, and indexes (38%); how to use supporting resources such as dictionaries, study guides, and encyclopedias (38%); and how to use the library to search for research articles (25%). It is also interesting to note that more than half the students said they often rote memorized information from texts, especially in preparation for tests; infrequently used the library to clarify or find supporting information; and relied on instructors for clarification of the readings and assignment requirements. This knowledge further supports the concern that many students have difficulties independently understanding variables, exploring anomalies, and performing propositional thinking; connecting ways of knowing with those of others; being open-minded; and challenging the ideas of others with confidence.

The view that reading is an active process and comprehension is successful only if students are engaged with the text is particularly significant when considering the majority of students said they experienced greater success in constructing meaning if they perceived the assigned readings as worthwhile and were able to connect new information to prior experiences. It is of interest, however, that only one fourth of the instructors felt that these were important considerations. In general, the students viewed themselves as critical thinkers capable of identifying and responding to significant ideas (94% of the students); determining and evaluating supporting evidence (69%); and separating fact from opinion (57%). The instructors, however, indicated doubts about the students' abilities to think critically. They reported that approximately 39% of the students were capable of identifying and responding to significant ideas; 54% were capable of determining and evaluating supporting evidence; and 31% were capable of separating fact from opinion. To encourage critical thinking, all the instructors said they used whole and small group question/discussion sessions; three fourths said they assigned question-response writing exercises, although only a third said they used journals for students to brainstorm ideas; three fourths said they lectured; and half said they used tests and quizzes. In comparison, the students noted that lecture sessions (75% of the students), question/discussion sessions (70%) , related homework assignments (49%), and whole class read aloud sessions (49%) were the most beneficial ways that instructors helped them understand the readings. Fewer students felt that writing about assigned readings (40%), additional readings (29%), and quizzes and tests (25%) furthered their understanding of reading or invited critical thinking.

According to the instructors, assigned readings were used primarily as sources of information to supplement lectures and to generate assignments. This supplementation was designed to help students develop foundations such as acquiring new concepts and vocabulary. In choosing reading materials, the instructors listed readability, including format and writing style; potential to hold students' interests; and content information quality and coverage as the primary considerations. When asked about the types of material they preferred to assign, three fourths listed text books, two thirds listed content-specific handouts, and half listed periodicals. Literature such as novels, plays, poems, biographies, newspapers, magazines, and essays was rarely assigned, nor was literature of local significance. The popular choice of textbooks by instructors is particularly interesting considering the majority of them felt that many students would find text books neither stimulating nor useful. When asked their preferences, the students listed magazines (84% of the students), newspapers (72%), novels (52%), textbooks (39%), and plays and poetry (12%). If students' needs and interests are important, it would be good advice for instructors to take students' preferences into account when choosing assigned readings.

When invited to suggest areas for professional development, the instructors asked for opportunities to learn about new trends in literacy theory and practice, including information on the holistic approach; how to become guides and facilitators, rather than transmitters of knowledge; how to model effective reading habits and attitudes; how to establish inviting classroom environments where learning and teaching are collectively determined by all participants; how to better motivate students; how to become better literacy instructors, including ideas on the selection of reading materials and the planning of activities and assignments; and how to develop effective methods of assessment that report students strengths and identify areas for concern.

Concluding Comments

This study reveals important information on the college students' reading motivation, strategy acquisition and application, and critical thinking abilities. The discrepancy between the students' perceptions of themselves as readers and the instructors' perceptions of their students as readers suggests that clarification of what constitutes effective content area reading is required. The instructors and students need to agree that "content area reading" is the ability to independently synthesize, organize, interpret, and apply information gained from content area texts. This agreement should be developed within a learning and teaching environment that views students as active, involved learners.

Finding effective ways to motivate students to read is another important consideration. The instructors should clearly outline the length of time the students should spend on their readings for each class, and provide suggestions for the students on how to organize their independent reading time. The selection of readings is also critical. Important considerations should include the length of each reading; the level of challenge; the level of interest; and the degree to which students are able to relate. Varying the types of readings (e.g., magazine articles, journal articles, textbooks, novels, plays, poems, biographies, newspapers) and involving students in the selection of the readings are likely to ensure greater success with content area reading.

Although the majority of the instructors were concerned that helping students develop effective reading skills and strategies would take time away from content area instruction, the data indicate that this is necessary. If students are unable to independently summarize, paraphrase, analyze, and apply information from their readings, it makes good sense to develop instructional approaches that focus on developing these skills and strategies. The students and instructors reported the importance of developing expertise in identifying the main ideas of the readings and making summary notes; using supporting resources such as dictionaries, study guides, and encyclopedias; using the library to search for related readings; referencing text summaries, glossaries, and indexes; discussing the purpose for the reading and asking related questions; drawing on prior experiences to make sense of the new information; writing critical responses to the readings; clarifying associated assignments; and preparing for tests.

Opportunities during class to identify and respond to significant ideas; determine and evaluate supporting evidence; separate fact from opinion; explore anomalies; perform propositional thinking; connect ways of knowing with those of others; be open-minded; and challenge the ideas of others with confidence are also recommended. The students and instructors suggested a variety of instructional approaches that would best support the students' literacy development. These included lectures; whole and small group question/discussion sessions; question-response writing exercises, and journal writing.

Because most of the instructors did not have backgrounds in language arts/literacy development, opportunities to learn about new trends in literacy theory and practice are recommended. These might include learning about the importance of viewing students as active, involved learners; of holding realistic perceptions of students' abilities and accomplishments; of understanding how students become literate and how to facilitate this development; of relating literacy development to content area instruction, including reading and writing for a variety of purposes; of catering to a range of students' needs by developing classroom programs that include a variety of instructional methods, resources, activities, and assessment procedures; and of mastering the critical roles instructors play in their classrooms including guide, model, mentor, and scaffolder.

In conclusion, it is recommended that future research should focus on the nature of the literacy attitudes, habits, abilities, understandings that students bring to college. Because many of these adult students have low motivation to read, or are not strategic readers, or are unable to think critically, community college instructors need to examine ways to work more closely with educators across the education system. Mooney (1988), in advocating the notion that the foundations of literacy are laid in the early years, provides the solution--it is the task of the education system, at all levels, to ensure that success in learning forms the foundation for further learning, and that learning to read and write is as natural, successful, and enjoyable as leaning to walk or talk.

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